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## **CHARLES DARWIN AND LADY HOPE — THE LEGEND STILL ALIVE**

Who would dare question the word of such a woman? [...] One may confidently conclude that Lady Hope did visit Darwin shortly before his death and that during this visit she did witness Darwin's renewed faith in the Christian Gospel [Croft 1989, 114].

[...] some apologists even add the name of Darwin, about whom persistent, but demonstrably false, rumours of a deathbed conversion continually come around like a bad smell [...] [Dawkins 2006, 97–98].

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are many anecdotes about Charles Darwin, the famous English naturalist. Among the many legends concerning his life and work, the most popular is the story spread by Lady Hope in 1915. Some claim that her story shows that Darwin not only became a Christian but even renounced his lifework — the theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwin's family, like many past or modern commentators, repeatedly rejected her testimony but still, from time to time, some new

opinions based on Lady Hope's account, that Darwin died as a Christian, appear.

## **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Elizabeth Reid Cotton was born on 9th December 1842 in Australia. She was the first child of Arthur T. Cotton and Elizabeth L. Learmouth. Her parents were devout Christians and the zeal of their religious feelings exerted influence on young Elizabeth. Soon after her birth they moved to Vizagapatam in Madras. Elizabeth Cotton regularly went horse riding and read the Bible with a missionary when, as Croft underlines, she was only eight years old [Croft 2012, 48–49].

In the mid-1850s, the Cotton family decided to settle in England. Soon after, young Elizabeth started frequenting Christ Church. Elizabeth Hope was a pious Christian and she was soon appreciated in evangelical circles. In the beginning of the 1870s, she, with her father's support, opened a Sunday school and this was a time when she increased her evangelical activity. Elizabeth Hope wanted to reach out to the English working class and she opened a "coffee-room" — a place where people could obtain a free meal and where they could hear the message of the Holy Bible. Elizabeth Hope was a lifelong critic of alcohol consumption. Later she wrote two books about her social activity: *Our Coffee-room* [James Nisbet, London 1876] and *More about Our Coffee-room* [James Nisbet, London 1878]. In the mid-1870s, she also visited people in their homes. During these meetings she read the Bible and encouraged common prayer.

In 1877 she married the much older admiral James Hope — he died in 1881. Soon after she got married, she became known as Lady Hope. She continued her evangelical and social activity. In the mid-1870s, she belonged to the main evangelical circles in England. She knew J.W.C Fegan who enjoyed Darwin's sympathy for his fight against drunkenness and helping orphans. When Fegan fell ill and had to leave his village mission, she became his deputy. This was in autumn 1881 and she later claimed that at that time she visited Darwin in Down House.

In 1893 she decided to marry again with the wealthy merchant Thomas A. Denny. In 1911, two years after her second husband died, she became bankrupt. Lady Hope claimed that she was defrauded by

Gerald Fry — “probably the most notorious conman of the time” as Croft claims [Croft 2012, 70]. A different and more reliable reason for her bankruptcy was presented by James Moore. He underlines that Elizabeth Hope obtained £75,000 from T.A Denny as a marriage settlement. From that time she started to live beyond her means and made many unsuccessful investments (for example, opened cheap hostels for servants). Denny, shortly before he died, feared about his future salvation and decided to squander his property. Lady Hope got another £75,000, which she soon lost and had £14,000 in liabilities [Moore 1994, 89–90]. With a lack of prospects Lady Hope decided to move to the USA. Many years earlier she had met Dwight L. Moody, an American evangelist — Moody died in 1899. In 1915 she decided to visit Moody’s family in Massachusetts. Then, during the annual Northfield Seminary, she spoke about Darwin’s alleged conversion at his death-bed. Her story was published in the American Baptist journal the *Watchman-Examiner* under the pseudonym Lady Hope:

It was on one of those glorious autumn afternoons, that we sometimes enjoy in England, when I was asked to go in and sit with the well known Professor, Charles Darwin. He was almost bedridden for some months before he died. I used to feel when I saw him that his fine presence would make a grand picture for our Royal Academy; but never did I think so more strongly that on this particular occasion.

He was sitting up in bed, wearing a soft embroidered dressing gown, of rather a rich purple shade. Propped up by pillows, he was gazing out on a far-stretching scene of woods and cornfields, which glowed in the light of one of those marvelous sunsets which are the beauty of Kent and Surrey. His noble forehead and fine features seemed to be lit up with pleasure as I entered the room.

He waved his hand toward the window as he pointed out the scene beyond, while in the other hand he held an open Bible, which he was always studying.

“What are you reading now?” I asked, as I seated myself by his bedside.

“Hebrews!” he answered — “still Hebrews. ‘The Royal Book,’ I call it. Isn’t it grand?”

Then, placing his finger on certain passages, he commented on them.

I made some allusion to the strong opinions expressed by many persons on the history of Creation, its grandeur, and then their treatment of the earlier chapters of the Book of Genesis.

He seemed greatly distressed, his fingers twitched nervously, and a look of agony came over his face as he said:

“I was a young man with unformed ideas. I threw out queries, suggestions, wondering all the time over everything; and to my astonishment the ideas took wildfire. People made a religion of them.”

Then he paused, and after a few more sentences on “the holiness of God” and “the grandeur of this Book,” looking at the Bible which he was holding tenderly all the time, he suddenly said:

“I have a summer house in the garden, which holds about thirty people. It is over there,” pointing through the open window. “I want you very much to speak there. I know you read the Bible in the villages. To-morrow afternoon I should like the servants on the place, some tenants and a few of the neighbors to gather there. Will you speak to them?”

„What shall I speak about?” I asked.

“CHRIST JESUS!” he replied in a clear, emphatic voice, adding in a lower tone, “and his salvation. Is not that the best theme? And then I want you to sing some hymns with them. You lead on your small instrument, do you not?”

The wonderful look of brightness and animation on his face as he said this I shall never forget, for he added:

“If you take the meeting at three o’clock this window will be open, and you will know that I am joining in with the singing.”

How I wished that I could have made a picture of the fine old man and his beautiful surroundings on that memorable day! [Lady Hope 1915, 1071]

For the rest of her life Elizabeth Hope sustained that she had visited and spoken with Darwin. She died in 1922.

Her article was written under the pseudonym “Lady Hope”. For a long time no one was able to identify who the person under this pseudonym was. Some authors even think that Lady Hope never existed. In 1974, a short note about Darwin was published in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. The author writes that: “Some credence is given to his nurse’s record [...] that the Epistle to the Hebrews brought him final consolation” [Victor Pearce 1974, 283]. It seems that Lady Hope was for the first time correctly recognized three years later in Richard B. Freeman’s book [Freeman 1977, 19].

## **2. DID DARWIN REALLY DIE AS A CHRISTIAN AND RENOUNCE HIS THEORY OF EVOLUTION?**

Lady Hope claimed that Darwin’s “ideas took wildfire”. The same can be said about her story [Moore 1994, 137–42]. James Moore in his excellent book shows that stories about Darwin’s conversion appeared soon after his death [Moore 1994, 113–15]. Nevertheless the authoress of the most well-known myth about the English naturalist was Elizabeth Hope. Her story was widely commented on by Darwin’s family:

### Francis Darwin:

Neither I nor any member of my family have any knowledge of her (Lady Hope) or of her supposed visits to Down which is quite obviously a work of imagination. He could not have become openly and enthusiastically Christian without the knowledge of his family, and no such change occurred. [Moore 1994, 144]

Lady Hope's account of her interview with my father is a fabrication, as I have already publicly pointed out. [Moore 1994, 145]

Lady Hope's account of my father's views on religion is quite untrue. I have publicly accused her of falsehood, but I have not seen any reply. [Moore 1994, 145]

### Henrietta Darwin:

I was present at his deathbed. Lady Hope was not present during his last illness, or any illness. I believe he never even saw her, but in any case she had no influence over him in any department of thought or belief. He never recanted any of his scientific views, either then or earlier. We think the story of his conversion was fabricated in [the] U.S.A. In most of the versions hymn-singing comes in, and a summer-house where the servants and villagers sang hymns to him. There is no such summer-house, and no servants or villagers ever sang hymns to him. The whole story has no foundation whatever. His last words may be found in my book: "Emma Darwin: A Century of Family Letters." (John Murray). [Moore 1994, 146]

### Leonard Darwin:

[...] Lady Hope's account of what took place at Down is entirely devoid of truth, being a pure invention or hallucination [...]. [Moore 1994, 149]

As I grow older my faith in the veracity of mankind gets steadily less and less, and now in my eighty-fifth year it is small indeed. Nothing has added more to this decay than the anecdotes which I have heard from time to time about my father, Charles Darwin. For example [...] a certain lady sent to the Press a long and purely fictitious account of the scene at his death-bed. [Moore 1994, 149–50]

Even James William Condell Fegan, who personally knew Darwin and Elizabeth Hope, rejected her testimony:

I have been appealed to several times about this story by those who knew my connection with the village of Downe, and have always said what I am sure everybody else would say who was living in Downe during Mr. Darwin's lifetime — that the interview as described by Lady Hope, and the service she said she was asked to hold in the summer-house, never took place. As a matter of fact, there never was a summer-house, in which a service could be held, in the grounds! [Moore 1994, 155–56]

Darwin's family at every opportunity denied Lady Hope's story. They knew that if Charles Darwin really became a Christian then there would be some evidence to support this thesis, but he did not leave even the smallest clue about his conversion. Nevertheless, as Tim M. Berra underlines:

Her apocryphal story was retold and embellished by Christian fundamentalists until it evolved into the "Darwin's deathbed-conversion myth." [Berra 2013, 79]

Darwin, before his marriage, was advised by his father not to speak about his religious doubts to his wife. He did not listen [Keynes 2002, 54–56. See also: Heiligman 2009]. Emma Darwin was a devout Christian (she attended Anglican church but her religious feelings were closer to Unitarian) and she was afraid that her husband would not attain salvation and they would not meet in Heaven. After their beloved daughter Annie died she wrote to him:

I am sure you know I love you well enough to believe that I mind your sufferings, nearly as much as I should my own, and I find the only relief to my own mind is to take it as from God's hand, and to try to believe that all suffering and illness is meant to help us to exalt our minds and to look forward with hope to a future state. [Litchfield 1915, 175]

Charles Darwin well knew about her anxieties. In 1839 she wrote to him: "Every thing that concerns you concerns me and I should be most unhappy if I thought we did not belong to each other forever". Darwin under her letter added: "When I am dead, know that many times, I have kissed and cried over this" (letter from E. Darwin to Ch. Darwin (February 1839), [Burkhardt, Smith 1986, 172]. However, he did not believe in an afterlife. He wrote in his autobiography that the

Christian view that the afterlife is a consequence of acts on Earth was a “damnable doctrine” [Clark 1984, 58]. If Darwin really changed his religious views in the last months of his life, his wife would certainly know about this. Henrietta Darwin published many letters written by her mother. There is not even the smallest clue in those letters to support Lady Hope’s story. The English naturalist died on 19th April 1882, and, as Janet Browne underlines, “There was no deathbed conversion, no famous last words” [Browne 2002, 495. See also: Pleins 2013, 104; Malec 2012, 79].

Some claim that Lady Hope’s story indicates not only that Darwin became a Christian but also that he renounced his lifework — the theory of evolution by natural selection. Elizabeth Hope delayed publishing her testimony for many years. Thomas D. Midgette claims that she finally decided to publish it because the number of people who believed in the theory of evolution had increased and Darwin’s views of the origin of life became dangerous to the Book of Genesis and whole Bible [Midgette 2007, 134–135].

The first question is: even if Darwin did renounce his theory, does that mean that this theory is wrong? The answer is: NO. Charles Darwin solved the “mystery of mysteries” — as he called the mystery of the origin of new species [Darwin 1972, 326]. Modern science provides much evidence in aid of the theory of evolution. The fact of evolution does not depend on Darwin’s “last words”. As Jesse Bering writes:

Whether Darwin died embracing the Christian Lord or slid off into death still the wary old agnostic he had been known as in life, it’s quite a stretch to claim that a verbal “taking back” of the theory of evolution has any repercussions for the central tents of evolutionary theory itself. Fortunately, the truth of natural selection doesn’t depend on the firmness of any one man’s convictions, even if that man is Charles Darwin. [Bering 2011, 199]

Robert T. Pennock expresses himself in a similar way:

[...] whether or not Darwin disavowed his theory on his deathbed is beside the point. Biologists do not accept the truth of evolution on the basis of Darwin’s authority but on the basis of the evidence. [...] Scientific knowledge is not “owned” by any individual so no individual, even the discoverer, can “take back” a theory. Even if Darwin had disavowed evolution on his deathbed it would have made no difference to its truth. [Pennock 1999, 71. See also: Isaak 2007, 201; Treharne 2012, 61]

The second question is: did Darwin really renounce his theory? The answer is: NO. Niles Eldredge in one of his book writes that “there is absolutely no documentation of such renunciation [...]” [Eldredge 2005, 12]. Historical evidence shows that Darwin believed in the theory of evolution in 1882 — after his alleged conversation with Elizabeth Hope — no less than he did in 1859 — when the *Origin of Species* was published. On 8th February 1882 Darwin wrote a letter to William Horsfall where he indicates clearly that shortly before his death he still believed in the theory of evolution:

In the succession of the older Formations the species and genera of trilobites do change, and then they all die out. To any one who believes that geologists know the dawn of life (i.e., formations contemporaneous with the first appearance of living creatures on the earth) no doubt the sudden appearance of perfect trilobites and other organisms in the oldest known life-bearing strata would be fatal to evolution. But I for one, and many others, utterly reject any such belief. (letter from Ch. Darwin to W. Horsfall (8 February 1882). [F. Darwin 1903, 398])

Darwin did not hide that he was an evolutionist:

Literally I cannot name a \single\ \youngish worker\ who is not as deeply convinced of the truth of Evolution as I am [...]. (letter from Ch. Darwin to J. Murray (21 January 1882). Murray Archive)

Darwin, in another letter written to Daniel Mackintosh, showed his conviction that naturalistic evolution would be ultimately proved in the future:

Though no evidence worth anything has as yet, in my opinion, been advanced in favour of a living being, being developed from inorganic matter, yet I cannot avoid believing the possibility of this will be proved some day in accordance with the law of continuity. (letter from Ch. Darwin to D. Mackintosh (28 February 1882). [F. Darwin 1903, 171])

It is worth mentioning that many years earlier Darwin rejected Asa Gray’s proposition of a theistic interpretation of his theory. In March 1862 Gray wrote to Darwin that he wanted to “baptize” Darwin’s theory which would provide its “salvation” (letter from A. Gray to Ch.



Darwin (31 March 1862). Burkhardt, Harvey, Porter, Topham 1997, 140). Nevertheless, Darwin's response in the *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* shows that he could not agree with his friend:

However much we may wish it, we can hardly follow Professor Asa Gray in his belief "that variation has been led along certain beneficial lines," like a stream "along definite and useful lines of irrigation." [Darwin 1868, 516. See also: Numbers 1993, 4]

Darwin, in the year that the *Origin of Species* was published, wrote in one of his letters to Charles Lyell that the theory of evolution by natural selection was purely naturalistic:

If I were convinced that I required such additions to the theory of natural selection, I would reject it as rubbish [...] I would give absolutely nothing for theory of nat. selection, if it require miraculous additions at any one stage of descent. (letter from Ch. Darwin to Ch. Lyell (11 October 1859). [Burkhardt, Smith 1991, 345])

There are many points which are incompatible with the content of "Darwin and Christianity". It is easy to understand Hector Hawton, who wrote in 1958: "I rubbed my eyes when I read in the *The Scotsman* that Darwin was converted to Christianity in his old age" [Hawton 1958, 4]. Nevertheless, Lady Hope's opinion was still popular in some Christian circles. John MacAlister, some years after Hawton's article, wrote in his book:

What a challenge to every "evolutionist," today! ... What a rebuke to ALL who neglect the Life-saving Information in the scientifically provable Bible! Fortunate, indeed, in these last days of Choice-Making, are we to have this account of Darwin's closing hours, with which to counteract the Life-losing brainwash by the atheist- "evolutionists," who never TELL us that their hero died a repentant Bible-believer and a believer in his Creator. Darwin died exalting the Word of God and the Lord Jesus — after nearly a whole lifetime in error. [MacAlister 1985, 35]

The most comprehensive research on Lady Hope's story was presented by James Moore in 1994 [Moore 1994, also Moore 1999, 220–233; Moore 2009, 142–151]. He underlined that Elizabeth Hope could have visited Charles Darwin, probably between 28th September

1881 and 2nd October 1881. Lady Hope knew some details about Darwin and Down House but many of her statements are nonsensical. Darwin in her story was an “almost bedridden” man, who ceaselessly read the Bible, who was enormously affected by Hebrews and the salvation of Jesus Christ, and who, by the open window in his bedroom, wanted to join in with the singing of gospel hymns in his summer house. Those statements are “certainly fictitious” [Moore 1994, s. 94]. Moore writes that even if she had visited and spoken with Darwin, their conversation did not look as she claimed in “Darwin and Christianity”:

This amazing account bears all the hallmarks of Lady Hope’s anecdotal imagination. Years of tract and novel writing had made her a skilled raconteur, able to summon up poignant scenes and conversations, and embroider them with sentimental spirituality. The distinction between fact and fancy in her writings was never well defined. [Moore 1994, 93–94]

Elizabeth Hope’s story was very improbable from the beginning. Although Darwin’s family and historians have denied her testimony the view that Darwin returned to Christianity “continued to flourish” [Clements 2009, 142] and is maintained even today.

### **3. WHY THE DARWIN-LADY HOPE LEGEND IS STILL ALIVE?**

Deathbed conversion stories often appear after the death of a famed agnostic or atheist. Such stories are frequently sustained not by historians but some conservative religious circles. There is a long list of freethinkers who allegedly changed their religious views before their last hours came. James Moore writes about Baruch Spinoza, François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), Thomas Paine, Pierre Laplace, Emma Martin, Emile Littré, Thomas Huxley, Luther Burbank and Bertrand Russell [Moore 1994, 22]. Trevor Treharne extends this list with the names of Christopher Hitchens and W.C. Fields [Treharne 2012, 59–60. See also: McCarthy 2006, 186–89]. We can also add to this list the names of David Hume, Jean-Paul Sartre, Carl Sagan and Steve Irwin. Of course conversion sometimes really happens. One of the most repeated examples is Anthony Flew, who converted from atheism to a deistic conception of God.

Some devout Christians really want to believe that Charles Darwin returned to his early faith and was saved after his death. But aside from Elizabeth Hope's story, there are no historically reliable testimonies that Darwin really believed in God:

[...] in no contemporary account of Darwin's death, in no obituary, in no local paper, nor even in the funeral sermon in Westminster Abbey, is there the slightest hint that Darwin, towards the end, altered his views of religion or of evolution. [Sloan 1960, 72]

If her story was widely renounced, the question is: why is this legend often repeated? It seems that some authors have their own reasons to believe that Lady Hope's story is true. These reasons are not supported by facts, but they are built on the basis of an ardent desire to believe in her account. Kazimierz Jodkowski underlines that "Darwin gained remarkable authority during his lifetime. It is no wonder that the believers attempted to acknowledge him as being one of "them" [Jodkowski 1998, 329; Jodkowski 1999, 29]. If there is no historical evidence, the only thing that remains for Lady Hope's adherents is hope:

A Christian can only hope that the seeds planted earlier took root at the end, and that he did place his faith in Christ before he died. [...] There is no joy for a Christian if anyone, even a lifelong opponent of the cross, slips into a Christless eternity. [Morris 2006 (emphasis mine)]

David Rosevear and Hannington Enoch express themselves in a similar way:

Whether or not we accept that Charles Darwin came to faith does not alter the fact that his earlier studies of origins by natural selection had turned him away from belief in the Scriptures [...] But if at the end of his life he came to faith in Christ, that agrees with what we know of the riches of God's grace. [Rosevear 1996, 4]

We thank God for the above confession from the Father of Evolution himself. It serves as a good warning to every youngster not to become vain in his or her imagination and blind to spiritual things. [Enoch 1967, 167]

Lady Hope's story was rejected by historians, evolutionists and many creationists. Tommy Mitchell writes that Christians should not

use this argument. (Mitchell) It is hard to disagree with Tim M. Berra who ascertains that Lady Hope's story represents "wishful thinking" [Berra 2009, 85]. A good example of this is Ivan Panin's opinion. Panin, who converted to Christianity himself, wrote in 1928:

[...] when a man spent a life which he owes to GOD in the companionship of winding worms on the one hand and frolicking monkeys on the other, and has had his full share in turning many a God-lover into a God-hater — even such a sinner of sinners the Great God for His Christ's sake does condescend to recall on his very death-bed from a madness which even literary courtesy, apart from God's grace, finds it difficult to name less mildly. [Panin 1928, 11]

This "wishful thinking" that was presented in Panin's article can also be found in books written many years later. L.R. Croft was convinced that Darwin's conversion story was true. Croft claims that he examined Lady Hope's story for many years. In 2012 he published a book which as a whole approves of Elizabeth Hope and her testimony. Croft proposes six reasons to support Darwin's conversion, but his arguments are inconclusive [Malec 2014, 261–63]. He claims that Elizabeth Hope was a reliable witness of Darwin's conversion because as an "evangelical Christian of the highest integrity" she could not lie [Croft 2012, 88]. Croft even writes that: "There is no doubt that the integrity of this lady is so outstandingly clear that it would be equivalent to blasphemy to call into question her word" [Croft 1989, 113].

One of the basic arguments for most of Lady Hope's adherents, including Croft, is the summer-house at Darwin's estate. Elizabeth Hope claims that she was asked to speak about Jesus Christ, his salvation and sing some gospel hymns. Croft writes about the "[...] silly mistake Henrietta Litchfield made when she denied that there was a summer-house at the end of the Sandwalk at Down House" [Croft 2012, 97]. It is worth carefully reading what H. Litchfield wrote: "there is n o s u c h summer-house" (emphasis mine). Lady Hope wrote about a place for thirty people. S u c h a summer-house did not exist, just as Darwin's daughter wrote. David Herbert is right when he writes:

It would be a spectacular revelation if the "father of evolutionism", in his last days, had indeed become a follower of Jesus Christ and rejected his belief system — a system that has become foundational to all modern learning. [...]

the evidence of either of these being a reality is highly questionable. [Herbert 2009, 153–154]

From the one side it is true that Lady Hope’s story is “highly questionable”, from the other it is impossible to prove definitely that her story is false. On that account, as Edward Caudill underlines, there will be always an open door for Elizabeth Hope’s adherents:

Also strengthening the myth is the fact that there is no way to prove that the story is absolutely wrong. The available evidence merely shows that it is highly improbable, not that it is absolutely impossible. This provides an opening for those who are content to rest their cases on the weaker evidence for the validity of her story. [Caudill 1997, 59]

However, if someone wants to base his statement on the historical facts, it is easy to notice many doubts concerning her story. If “Darwin and Christianity” represents true events, why did she delay publishing her testimony for so many years? If she was absolutely sure that Darwin really returned to Christianity, why did she never answer to Francis Darwin? If she really spoke with Charles Darwin would she be able to remember their conversation for over thirty years? Perhaps she had a good memory, but if so, why did she add some more details to her later testimony, and omit these details in 1915? Finally, why do even most creationists presently refuse her testimony?

If someone really wanted to prove Darwin’s conversion, then reliable historical evidence for this needs to be found. However, it seems that such evidence does not exist. Certainly, Elizabeth Hope’s testimony is not such evidence.

#### **4. LADY HOPE’S STORY IN MODERN PERSPECTIVE\***

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\* This section has arisen through opinions kindly sent by: Francisco J. Ayala, Jerry Bergman, Andrew Berry, John H. Brooke, Peter J. Bowler, Richard W. Burkhardt, Piotr Bylica, James T. Costa, Jerry Coyne, Daniel C. Dennett, Douglas J. Futuyma, John F. Haught, Randal Keynes, Ulrich Kutschera, Bernard V. Lightman, Kenneth R. Miller, J. David Pleins, William B. Provine, David Quammen, Robert J. Richards, Michael Ruse, Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, Ian Tattersall, John van Wyhe, Momme von Sydow, Benjamin Wiker, Edward O. Wilson. I would like to express my great gratitude to these authors.

Lady Hope's story is widely rejected by modern scholars. The lack of reliable historical sources is often underlined:

Francisco J. Ayala (biologist and philosopher):

All reliable historical sources known to me indicate that Lady Hope's story is untrue.

John H. Brooke (historian of science):

There is no substantive evidence to support the story, which has been spread by ultra-conservative Christians to help support their anti-evolution position [...] it [is] inconceivable that he had a death-bed renunciation of his life's work.

Robert J. Richards (historian of science):

I believe there is no evidence that Darwin converted to Christianity and renounced evolution on his death bed. The story is a blatant fabrication. James Moore completely refutes this story in his book *The Darwin Legend*.

Piotr Bylica (philosopher of science):

I think that it is likely that L.H. visited Darwin's house, but there is rather no convincing argument for her story on Darwin's comeback to Christianity and his alleged refutation of the theory of evolution. In fact, it is irrelevant for the issue of truthiness of the theory of evolution itself, whether Darwin refuted it or not. If we take classical, correspondence theory of truth, a theory is true or false independently of somebody's opinion. All that matters is its adequacy with how things really are. If so, then even if L.H. wasn't at the dying Darwin's bedside, it could still be true that he came back to Christianity and refuted his own theory. In this story by L.H. there is also an issue of relation between Christianity and theory of evolution. Do they really contradict themselves completely? If Darwin had wanted to reconcile him with God, maybe he could have only changed his mind on some parts or interpretations of his theory. There are in fact many more options for the last moments of Darwin's life. The oversimplifying disjunction between Christianity and evolution assumed in L.H. story seems to be rather an argument against truthiness of her story.

John van Wyhe (historian of science):

I do not know of any historian who takes this myth at all seriously. The evidence against it is utterly overwhelming.

Randal Keynes (great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin):

[...] Professor James Moore, one of the top Darwin scholars in the world, has written the definitive study of Lady Hope and Darwin in his book *The Darwin*

legend, 1994. He researched all the facts he could find, weighed them very carefully [...] and his conclusions are accepted by every other Darwin scholar I know!

**Momme von Sydow (philosopher and psychologist):**

At the end of his life Darwin may have met Lady Hope in reality and figuratively. Perhaps even the last changes in his biological theory may have allowed him to think that his own theory is at least incomplete. However, a deathbed conversion story seems implausible to me and it seems not even implied by Lady Hope's story. Darwin had continuously lost his faith in the Bible and in Paley's natural theology, partly based on own biological theory (which paradoxically was influenced by some ideas of Paley as well). Instead of a sudden conversion, it seems more likely that Darwin all the time remained the mannered and polite Gentleman who studied theology at Cambridge and likewise the sympathetic husband of his pious wife Emma. Darwin, despite his loss of faith, may even have honestly liked the firm religious belief of Lady Hope, reminding him of his own former belief and the remaining faint hope that one perhaps might harmonise biology and theology in future.

No reliable evidence exists that Lady Hope's story is true. Instead of this we have Darwin's autobiography, hundreds of his letters and the testimony of his family. On the basis of this we have a picture of Darwin as a scientist who always respected the religious views of every man. He thought that belief or disbelief in God was the personal matter. Elizabeth Hope's touching story is undoubtedly incompatible with information we have about this great naturalist:

**Ulrich Kutschera (plant physiologist and evolutionary biologist):**

The story is definitively not true. All available documents show that Charles Darwin (1809–1882), who was raised as a Christian, lost his faith when he came back to England from his 5-year-trip on the HMS Beagle [...] He remained an "Agnostic", a term coined by Huxley, until the end of his life, and there is no evidence that he re-gained his belief in miracles and supernatural explanations until his death.

**Edward O. Wilson (biologist):**

The story is false. Darwin's family never recorded such an event.

**Kenneth R. Miller (biologist):**

The "Lady Hope" story was first related in public in 1915 more than 30 years after Darwin's death. If the story were true, it seems to me that at least three

things would have confirmed it. The first would have been an immediate public announcement by Elizabeth Cotton (who is usually identified as “Lady Hope”). That never happened. The second would have been confirmation from those present, including Darwin’s son Francis, when Darwin died that Ms. Cotton was present. In fact, Francis publicly called the story a lie. The third would have been an expression of relief from Emma Darwin, Charles’ wife, that her husband had finally accepted Christianity. Since this was always Emma’s hope, she would have immediately confirmed the story had it been true. Obviously, it was not.

**Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis (historian of science):**

All the evidence points to Darwin being an agnostic by the end of his life, and there is more than a bit that suggests that the untimely death of Annie, his beloved daughter, had a great deal to do with it. He never really came to terms with why a benevolent God would take the life of his sweetest child. It is a complete falsehood that he recanted or even denounced his theory at the end of his life as he lay dying. That is just nonsense. [...] this recantation myth is a complete fabrication.

**Richard W. Burkhardt (historian of science):**

I have heard of the Lady Hope story, but I never thought there was any reason to believe it, because it is wholly inconsistent with the direction of Darwin’s thinking [...] the story of Darwin’s conversion is false. The additional idea that he also renounced his theory of evolution is simply preposterous.

Finally, if we have no reliable evidence that Darwin rejected his theory and returned to Christianity but we have a lot of information about Darwin’s personal life, his scientific and religious views, what can be said about Lady Hope’s story? Nothing more than that this is a baseless folklore, nonsense, falsehood, false, clumsy hoax or total fiction:

**Daniel C. Dennett (philosopher and cognitive scientist):**

This utterly baseless folklore has been spread for more than a century, and has been debunked many times. There is no evidence at all that Darwin had a conversion late in his life.

**William B. Provine (historian of science and evolutionary biologist):**

Lady Hope was full of nonsense. All Darwin’s sons were atheists. They protected him from folks like Lady Hope, but Darwin himself wanted to see



her. I am sure he remained an atheist; everything says this is true. Darwin had many religious friends. Only the best got to see Darwin after the Origin.

**Douglas J. Futuyma (evolutionary biologist):**

The Lady Hope story is one of countless falsehoods or misunderstandings that are perpetuated or promulgated by opponents of evolutionary science [...] he [Darwin] did profess to be agnostic, and wrote in his Autobiography about his slow loss of religious belief, as he became more and more a scientist who became increasingly convinced that belief in anything should be based on evidence.

**Peter Bowler (historian of science):**

[...] her belief he had renounced his theory is false.

**John F. Haught (theologian):**

The story is almost certainly false. No respectable biographer accepts it as far as I know. This is not to say, however, that Darwin was irreligious.

**David Quammen (science writer and explorer):**

Her story is a clumsy hoax, a mendacious insult to the intellectual integrity and courage of Darwin in his final days. It exists for people who wish to delude themselves. [...] It is baloney. The reliable historical commentary we have from those around him in his final days — his son Francis, his wife Emma — gives the lie to her dimwitted piety. “Lady Hope.” Phaagh. Darwin struggled courageously over these questions, and he knew what he believed. And did not believe. He was an agnostic. He was, as he said at the end, “not the least afraid to die,” in his absence of belief. She was a contemptible falsifier. And there is no evidence whatsoever to support her concocted claims.

**Jerry Coyne (evolutionary biologist):**

This story is completely bogus: a fabrication. [...] The telling thing is that even the young-earth creationists have rejected this story, and tell their adherents not to use it.

**Michael Ruse (philosopher of biology and historian of science):**

It is a total fiction — Darwin did not convert to Christianity and he did not repudiate his theory.

**Ian Tattersall (paleoanthropologist):**

[...] she is certainly wrong that Darwin ever renounced evolution [...].

**James T. Costa (biologist):**

[...] it is one of those myths that has taken on a life of its own in some quarters. I suggest that even had Darwin expressed any kind of religious sentiments on his deathbed — and I doubt very much that he did — it is extremely unlikely that such sentiments would have been expressed in terms of personal salvation through Jesus Christ, etc. as claimed in the Lady Hope story. To the extent that Darwin had a spiritual sense — and whether he had any religious sensibility later in life, and if so what kind and to what extent, has been much discussed and debated by historians — he certainly did not believe in a personal god and personal salvation. So, if he had expressed any sort of religiosity on his deathbed it would have been in more deistic terms.

One thing I have always found odd about such “conversion,” “retraction,” or “change-of-mind” stories [...] is that they are attractive to those opposed to the ideas being purportedly retracted, yet those who embrace and repeat such stories do not seem to reflect on the fact that with respect to the topic of discussion any such “conversion” or change-of-mind is irrelevant to the question of veracity or validity. So, even if Darwin had somehow retracted his theory and said he accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior, that would be fine for him but it tells us nothing about the truth or veracity of his theory itself. It would be a bit like saying that if a figure such as Martin Luther King Jr. said, on his deathbed, that he changed his mind about civil rights and equality for people of color (however implausible that scenario!), then the whole question of civil rights and equality is undermined. That is complete nonsense of course — the message and the messenger are completely different. The message, idea, or discovery is an altogether separate issue from what its originator ends up thinking about it. To give a more scientific scenario, if Newton changed his mind about universal gravitation, his work and gravitational theory is not in any way negated. Scientific theories and hypotheses stand or fall on the basis of repeated testing and following out predictions, etc. So, a discoverer’s opinion is irrelevant really. That point seems to be lost on those who perpetuate the Lady Hope myth — the ultimate response to them should be “And so? What if he did?”

**Andrew J. Berry (evolutionary biologist and historian of science):**

I was fully convinced by James Moore’s book on the subject, *The Darwin Legend*. Moore concludes that the meeting did take place but that the conversion tale is a later (untrue) gloss.

**J. David Pleins (religion scholar):**

I think that James Moore’s treatment of this topic (*The Darwin Legend*) does a very good job in dispelling her claims as to Darwin’s so-called deathbed conversion. While it seems that Moore leaves room for the possibility that she met Darwin in connection with James Fegan’s evangelical work at Downe, I personally have my doubts on that score as well. Certainly Fegan had a real and profound connection with Darwin, but Lady Hope’s story surfaces so much later that one would think that Fegan would have shed some light on

such a connection if she was being truthful about her visit. [...] these sorts of things have tended to obscure a more important aspect of Darwin's work on the evolution of religion, namely that despite his skepticism toward traditional Christianity he nonetheless held a lifelong interest in understanding religion as a human and natural phenomenon. He also continued to read in theology till late in his life. This, of course, is very different than speaking of a "conversion," but it does reveal a side to Darwin that is often downplayed or ignored in many discussions of his life and his view of religion.

**Bernard V. Lightman (historian):**

In my opinion, James Moore's book, *The Darwin Legend*, exploded the myth of Darwin's deathbed conversion. The evidence he presented in this definitive study persuaded me that Darwin never renounced his theory and never returned to the Christian faith.

Lady Hope's testimony is rejected even by critics of naturalistic evolution. In Jerry Bergman's and Benjamin Wiker's opinion, there exist strong reasons to believe that Lady Hope's Darwin's conversion story is false.

Croft, in the preface to *Darwin and Lady Hope*, writes that he is "not an advocate of conspiracy theories" [Croft 2012, vii]. However, it seems that Darwin's conversion story is only one big conspiracy theory.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It is extremely improbable that Lady Hope's story is true. However, even if we agree with her testimony, it does not indicate Darwin's conversion, because what did Darwin really say? In reality he only read Hebrews and declared that this book was "grand". If Elizabeth Hope had really visited and spoken with Darwin she perhaps wanted to believe that Darwin returned to Christianity so much, that she convinced herself about this. Whether or not this is what happened, her article from 1915 is the main basis on which arose, and still exists, the legend of Darwin's conversion.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **CHARLES DARWIN AND LADY HOPE – THE LEGEND STILL ALIVE**

The theme of the present paper is the story of Darwin's conversion as spread by Elizabeth Hope. Her article was published in August 1915. She wrote under the pseudonym "Lady Hope", and her paper was titled "Darwin and Christianity". Elizabeth Hope claimed that she visited Charles Darwin in autumn 1881, a couple of months before his death. Darwin during her visit was supposedly bedfast and reading Hebrews. During their conversation Darwin allegedly asked her to speak about Jesus Christ and sing some hymns in his summer house. I claim that (1) strong arguments exist that Lady Hope's story is only the fruit of her imagination, and (2) all her adherents can only have hope that Darwin, renouncing his theory, returned to Christianity. Finally, I show some unpublished opinions of modern scholars which indicate that Darwin's conversion never took place, and he never rejected his theory of evolution by natural selection.

**KEYWORDS:** Lady Hope, Charles Darwin, James Moore, deathbed conversion, Christianity